

EMILY DICKINSON :
19th CENTURY IMPRESSIONIST IN
AMERICAN POETRY

by
GEORGE F. HENDERSON

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THESIS

EMILY DICKINSON: 19th CENTURY IMPRESSIONIST
IN AMERICAN POETRY

by

GEORGE FRANCIS HENDERSON

(PhB., ST. MICHAEL'S COLLEGE, 1942)

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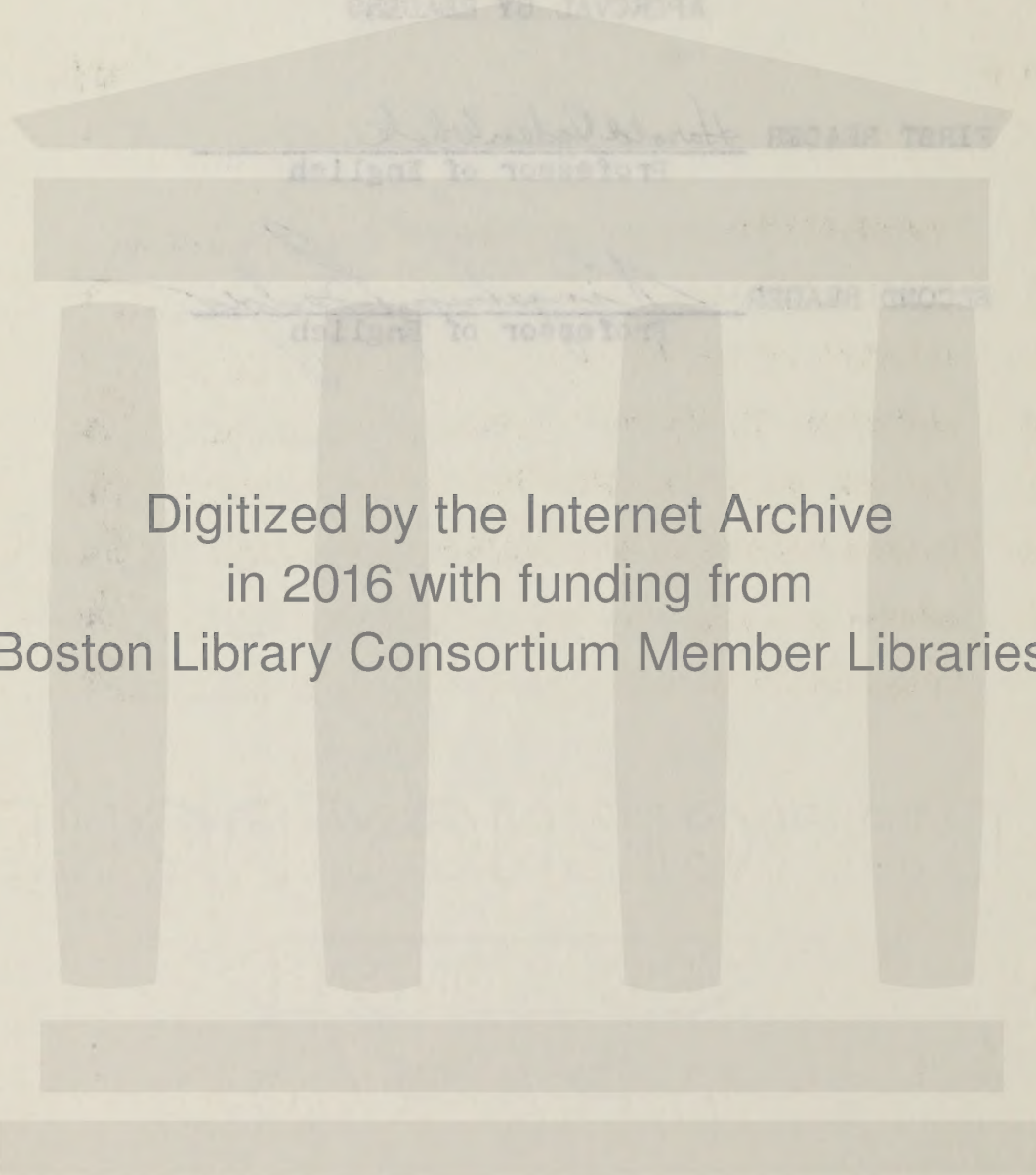
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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter		Page
	Topical Outline.....	1
I	INTRODUCTION.....	1
II	IMPRESSIONISM.....	3
III	EVIDENCE OF REVOLT.....	7
IV	ASSERTION OF INDIVIDUALISM.....	23
V	GOD AND EMILY TRIUMPHANT.....	54
VI	IMPRESSIONISM IN HER POETRY.....	66
VII	SUMMARY.....	89
	BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	95

TOPICAL OUTLINE

I INTRODUCTION

A. Purpose of study

1. Indication of dominant characteristics in Emily Dickinson's poetry
2. Comparison of Miss Dickinson's standards in poetry with the standards of Emerson, Impressionism and Imagism

B. Importance of study

1. Period of importance in American poetry
 - a. Waning Romantic traditions
 - b. Rising Realism

C. Plan of Procedure

1. Some of Impressionist tenets
2. Tenets evident in her work
3. Impressions she found

II IMPRESSIONISM

A. Emphasis on Individuality

1. Tend to more Realism than Romantics

B. Find materials in commonplace

1. Academic yoke discarded

C. Characteristics of Impressionism

1. Revolt
2. Individuality

D. As found in Emily Dickinson's work

III EVIDENCE OF REVOLT

A. Against society

1. Her disappointments
 - a. Conformity
 - b. Love
 - c. Anticipation
 - d. Friends
 - e. Customs of mating
 - f. Artificiality of society

B. Advantages of Nature

1. Self satisfaction

C. Against organized religion

1. Church going distasteful
 - a. To father
 - b. To Emily
2. Mt. Holyoke
 - a. Nonconformity
3. God personal
 - a. "Ritual so small"

IV. ASSERTION OF INDIVIDUALISM

- A. Nature one source
 - 1. Observations absorbing
 - a. Daily scenes
 - b. Seasons
 - c. Animals and flowers
- B. Language unique source
 - 1. Regional
 - a. Housewifely terms
 - b. Individual mood
- C. Love experience as a source
 - 1. Heights
 - 2. Depths
 - 3. Withdrawal

V GOD AND EMILY TRIUMPHANT

- A. God necessary
 - 1. Inherited
 - 2. Restless without Him
 - 3. Faith strong
- B. An important poetic subject
 - 1. God present in most poems
 - 2. Optimistic philosophy
- C. Poetry must out
 - 1. Her release

VI IMPRESSIONS IN HER POETRY

- A. Freedom of expression
 - 1. Mechanics
- B. Impressions
 - 1. Life
 - 2. Nature
 - 3. Love
 - 4. God
- C. Unfinished work

VII SUMMARY

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Purpose of the thesis. My purpose in writing this thesis is to establish a relation between the spirit of Emily Dickinson's poetry and the fundamental principles of the 19th century French Impressionist Painters. A comparison of her standards in art with those of the Impressionist Painters indicates a remarkable similarity between the two fields in theory and practice. The comparison of two divergent artistic realms may seem unorthodox; yet, however different the media of expression may be, the creations of Miss Dickinson and these artists form a close bond of kinship. Through examples of her poetry and comments about it by critics and biographers, I aim to show the validity of this kinship. A detailed analysis of her poems on Life, God and Nature serves a further purpose of affording the reader with an appreciation of Miss Dickinson's topics, effects and techniques.

Importance of the study. Eminent historians and literary scholars are calling Emily Dickinson, "the greatest poet of her day"¹ and, "the chief woman poet of America"²

¹ Hacker and Kendrick, The United States Since 1865, (1946), p. 120

² Jones and Leisy, Major American Writers, (1945), p. 1208.

Consequently, it is important to ascertain where she will stand in the poetic hall of fame. Miss Dickinson had the distinction of appearing on the scene at a transitional period in American thought. She forms a poetic link between the waning Romantic traditions of the post Civil War period and the soaring Realism of the newborn industrial epoch. It is important that we know to which period she belonged. Her special individuality and quiet revolt against New England Puritanism are not only traits of Impressionistic individualism and Romantic revolt, but also characteristics of the new Realistic order of things. In the complete portrait it would seem this whimsical puck of poetry followed her star unconscious of where she placed her feet.

Plan of Procedure. The thesis proper will first contain several definitions of Impressionism. Some of the Impressionist tenets will be mentioned. Emily Dickinson's poems will be used, unraveling step by step, the appearance of the main Impressionistic characteristics in her style. From the characteristics it will be a short step to point out various Impressions existing in her poetry. A combination of traits and practices of Impressionism in her poems plus the unfinished nature of her work will constitute the claim that Emily Dickinson is an Impressionist.

CHAPTER II

IMPRESSIONISM

"Impressionism (Painting) - a lively or profound effect on feeling, sense or the intellect." - is Webster's definition.

Thomas Craven, art critic, says

It is an art without design,... nature modified by the mind, the imposition of the will on the elements of experience.¹

Impressionism carried on the healthy realism of Courbet and Manet by dispensing with conventional subject-matter, drew attention to the artistic material in the nooks and corners of the everyday world...²

Vigorously the French painters, Monet, Manet, Cezanne, Renoir, Degas, Seurat, Van Gogh and Gauguin, to mention outstanding Impressionists, followed the two premises defined above. The sincerity of their convictions in following their artistic star led them to a revolt against the traditional. They were dissatisfied with imitation of the Masters. They were also impatient with the fictions of the Romantics. According to Mr. Craven, the step was toward Realism.

¹

Craven, Modern Art, p.72 .

²

Ibid, pp. 74-75.

Somehow the dull colors in the Museums in Paris and the other accepted art centers were indicative of a dead technique. The only solution was to strike out on their own and discover new realms of color. Consequently, they threw off the yoke of the academicians. "All were revolutionaries or believed that they were ... and were in violent reaction against official teaching."¹ Here is one of the prime characteristics of Impressionism, revolt. Not just any kind of revolt or opposition was meant, but a revolt against the "Grand Style" because it was too stilted; it hampered originality. Freedom to serve one's own Master, the inner force of creative talent, was essential. So strongly did they feel this inner compulsion that the Impressionist Painters developed technique and style differing from each other. "It would have been better to have called the 1877 group independents, independents they were, each man pursuing his own rainbow."² Here is the second important trait of Impressionism, individuality. Mix in emotions and feelings, vigor of execution, new color harmonies, the results of personalized painting, and we view the fundamental ingredients of an Impressionist.

¹Bell, Landmarks in 19th Century Painting, p.186 .²Huneker, Promenades of an Impressionist, p. 37.

Personalities and formulae do not mix, for it is "Hard to express something as personal as emotions and feelings by cold rules laid down by someone who had never felt them or at least felt them in the same way."¹

The combination of these traits is prevalent throughout Emily Dickinson's work. Some traits are more apparent than others. The sum of all traits is Impressionism. However, it would be a harmful and thankless task to place her in a 'school' of Impressionism. Like each of the painters, she was an original genius, creative, standing apart. Above all she is a supreme individualist employing a distinctive style in her profession. The personality she discloses to us is introspective, distinctive, emotionally intense and sincere. Her emotional intensity and unique treatment of subjects have led her to the realm of Impressionism. This new vogue in painting was striving for recognition at almost the same time when Emily Dickinson was fashioning some of her finest verses. She, too, tried to capture vague fancies and fleeting beautiful moments instantaneously. Her sincerest emotions had to be poured out at white hot heat. Hers was the same intensity that forced Vincent Van Gogh literally to squeeze tubes of bright color onto his canvas before he

1

Thrall and Hibbard, A Handbook of Literature, p.210.

should lose the fugitive vision of creation. Emily Dickinson was the equal of each of these Impressionist Painters and individualists; touched little by the form and substance of contemporary work, she followed her own colorful rainbow - a law unto herself in poetic practice. The hasty but brilliant and daring imagery of that practice is sheer Poetic Impressionism.

CHAPTER III

EVIDENCE OF REVOLT

"Revolution is the pod systems rattle from."¹

Emily Dickinson has left only a small group of poems dealing objectively with men and women and public affairs. The greater bulk of her work is concerned with 1) the internal world of her mind and emotions and 2) the external world of her garden. At first glance this is a normal enough paradox of human nature: a dual world exists, one an inner life of dreams and desires and the other an outer world of reality. Miss Dickinson had sufficient common sense to recognize the existence of this paradox and she interestingly interwove the two worlds in her art. Fact and fancy received an equal share of scrutiny in her earnest attempts to record the phenomena of two worlds. One was equally dependent on the other and the two were inseparable.

Miss Dickinson's revolt was quiet, bloodless. She objected to 1) society 2) organized religion and 3) God. God was not so much recoiled against, however, as doubted. There was method in her revolt of quiet withdrawal because she reasoned:

¹

Bianchi, Further Poems of Emily Dickinson, p.37.

Much madness is divinest sense
 To a discerning eye;
 Much sense the starkest madness.
 'Tis the majority
 In this, as all, prevails.
 Assent, and you are sane;
 Demur - you're straightway dangerous,
 And handles with a chain. ¹

In other words, conform to society, or object out loud and you will be shunned by the crowd or put aside as dangerous. Miss Dickinson refused to conform as the Impressionist Painters refused. However, she chose the path of quiet withdrawal from the world of affairs as the type of revolution most suited to her feminine delicacy. From this seclusion, the "pod" of her Revolution, she developed her independent poetic "system."

It is not too difficult to assimilate some of the reasons why Miss Dickinson revolted or the steps that gradually led to withdrawal. For those who are romantically inclined, the first reason called to mind is the story of her frustrated love affair. This reason is taken for granted and is subject for later treatment but there are other factors, not least of which is Edward Dickinson's desire to keep his two daughters, Lavinia and Emily, at his side. The fact of his parental domination is often sublimated to the more appealing fancy of an unfructified

1

Bianchi, Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson, p.9.

love affair. Nevertheless, Emily Dickinson staged a personal revolt against society and God about which her poems speak for her. Lavinia, too, was a spinister, but no one makes as much point of that as of Emily's spinisterhood. The obvious answer is that Emily had a secret passion, poetry.

Both young ladies had had their share of beaux, both had been very active in Amherst society. Emily had even gone to Washington for several weeks with her Congressman father, and she had enjoyed herself in the Capitol. The trip was so enjoyable that her only published letter about it pictures her wondering if she had dreamed the visit, if the world is all a dream. Even if it seemed a dream, something was lacking. Josephine Pollit, a biographer, indicates that social affairs, though happy ones, could leave Miss Dickinson with a sense of disappointment.

"At sixteen, realization had seemed always to fall short of anticipation."¹

Perhaps the disappointing society of men did not hold enough happiness for her, compared to her garden or her poetry. We note that she said that once given over to poetry, she would at no time long for "earthly play and

¹
Pollit, Emily Dickinson, The Human Background of Her Poetry, p.54.

mortal company."¹ Her sensitive nature, too, had been hurt deeply by personal friends in whom she had placed trust. She is almost bitter in self-condemnation for choosing friends poorly:

It dropped so low in my regard
I heard it hit the ground
And go to pieces on the stones
At the bottom of my mind;

Yet blamed the fate that fractured less
Than I reviled myself
For entertaining plated wares
Upon my silver shelf. ²

Personal hurt, and broader views of New England society exasperated Miss Dickinson:

As Emily made a survey of the social life in the village of her day, she observed the regularity with which strong-minded men were mating with weak-minded women. She saw a New England spinster in almost every household, an intellectual woman, usually, who had no true outlet for her mental energy. She resented the fact that a girl often had to become something less than she was in order to win the passionate devotion of a man; that she had to put up her brain as well as her hair under a net cap. She is said to have concluded, 'To hell with such a society.'³

1

Todd and Bingham, Bolts of Melody, p. 123.

2

Bianchi, op. cit., p. 63.

3

Pollit, op. cit., p. 76.

Miss Dickinson voiced her opinions of Amherst society and its ladies with, "What soft, cherubic creatures these gentlewomen are," and any virile man, she feels, "would as soon assault a plush Or violate a star." These hypocritical young ladies who preside at teas and socials have "such dimity convictions" and a "horror so refined Of freckled human nature" or - worst of all - "are Of Deity ashamed." Strong words from an intellectual woman directed at her weak-minded sisters indicate Miss Dickinson's hatred of shallowness and hypocrisy. Her contempt is as fivorous as any a man could muster. She has no patience with a superficial "brittle lady" of whom she says "Redemption, Be so, ashamed of thee."¹

It is impossible to view her clear contempt for such a society as a sentimental reason for becoming a recluse. The decision to revolt against and withdraw from her social sphere was based on what she felt was society's worthlessness to her. Her decision was based on the hurt she had received from false friendships, plus the positive appear⁴ nature had to quiet her spirit. Nature is not superficial since, "best things dwell out of sight."² Thought appealed for itw own sake because it was "The pearl, the just, our thought," also

¹
Bianchi, op. cit., p.68.

²
Todd and Bingham, Bolts of Melody, p.274.

dwelling out of sight. Add to these the very special and private memory of an unknown person who could make Miss Dickinson proclaim, "Society for me my misery since gift of thee," ¹ and we have the major reasons why Emily Dickinson became a quiet social revolutionist and an individualist who preferred her own company to that of others. In case there are doubters still, she concludes the argument saying:

"My best acquaintances are those
With whom I spoke no word." ²

Society of Amherst with its customs and bonds had been objectively examined and found wanting. Miss Dickinson withdrew from it to the secluded precincts of her heart and garden. She justified her physical seclusion with a subjective study which convinced her that self-satisfaction is the only key to world peace. The ease of one's conscience is better than all worldly acclaim. An individual is answerable to himself first, not society:

My soul accused me
And I quailed

As tongue of diamond
Had reviled.

¹
Ibid, p. 319.

²
Ibid, p. 122.

All else accused me
 And I smiled.
 My soul that morning
 Was my friend.

Her favor is the best
 Disdain
 Toward artifice of Time
 Or men

But her disdain - 't were
 Cooler bear
 A finger of enameled fire!¹

If an individual follows his own star, he will find worthy self-approbation more pleasant than fame; but compromise one's ideals to popular standards and there is no surcease from outraged conscience. Emily Dickinson had vindicated Emily Dickinson's way of life. No one else's opinion mattered. Social revolt was completed. She carried on her revolt in seclusion, unlike Emerson's individuality in the midst of the crowd extolled in his essay, Self-Reliance.

God was another problem, however. You could become angry at society and shun it but God was everywhere, inescapable, omnipotent. To one bred in Puritan New England, the seat of orthodoxy, religion was a part of life comparable to daily bread. Why Amherst College had been founded to stem the rising tide of heresies, emanating from Harvard;

1

Bianchi and Hampson, Further Poems of Emily Dickinson, p. 122.

Mt. Holyoke Academy had the aim of training young ladies to be missionary mates, a fine distinction from wives. The Bible was a classic. Edward Dickinson insisted that his children read it thoroughly; religion was life. Church-going was different; Father went or he did not - there was no fuss or bother about that. God was present fundamentally, whether one went to Church or not.

Emily Dickinson passed through various stages in her relationship with God. The first stage was one of Church-going. The next period was one of doubting, not so much God but orthodoxy, and finally the discovery of God without benefit of cant or creed. However, doubts came early, as early as the days of classes at Mt. Holyoke.

One day in chapel at Mt. Holyoke, Miss Lyons asked all girls who believed in the orthodox religion to stand thus indicating their conformity. Emily Dickinson, who had tried her best to believe "like the others," was the only girl who did not stand. The God of religion was not for her.¹

1

Yet God was to Emily Dickinson as color was to the Impressionist Painters. Hers was a spiritual problem and theirs was a material one. She sought a touchstone for her work and found it in God. The Impressionists found their touchstone in color. Without God Miss Dickinson was lost, confused, doubtful. Without color Impressionism would probably never have been born. The painters declared color was all in preference to line. They carried on exhaustive experiments in color to find bright colors catching every

She had early recognized God's presence: "God was chiefest of the crowd" in the "far theatricals of day" when her child's faith was new," when with "fresh eyes,"

subtle nuance in life. Miss Dickinson left many poems on God so exhaustive was her search for Him and through Him her answer to life. Poet and Painter had need of a foundation for art, each had experimented until personally satisfied that a basis for art had been found. The experimentation period of Miss Dickinson and the Impressionist Painters are histories themselves impossible to relate here in detail. It is sufficient to state that each left prolific examples to indicate the enormity of the task undertaken. Both histories are related in The History of Impressionism and This Was a Poet respectively. It is interesting to note also that the two tasks were undertaken in the 1850's and probably reached successful climaxes in the period from 1860 to 1878.

Strangely enough it is safe to assume that neither Poet nor Painter was aware of the other's existence at any time. Impressionist paintings did not reach the United States until after Miss Dickinson's death and her poems were not published until after her death.

she "never had a doubt."¹ She admits, "I prayed at first - a little girl - because they told me to."² This automatic prayer was the early stage before it was time to think about religion for oneself. Then came the quiet revolt of the Mt. Holyoke episode when "Color, Caste, Denomination" become "Time's affair," not Miss Lyon's doctrines or any one else's, since "Death's large democratic fingers rub away the brand."³ Once she had established the democracy of religion and death she felt a special creed was unnecessary because, after all, "I dwell in Possibility"⁴ where "the spreading wide my narrow hands to gather Paradise"⁵ is not bounded or limited by any official Church. "My faith is larger than the Hills"

¹ Bianchi and Hampson, Further Poems of Emily Dickinson, p. 24.

² Ibid, p. 45.

³ Ibid, p. 10.

⁴ Ibid, p. 30.

⁵ Ibid, p. 58.

so can not be held within the confines of man-made religion. She realized "Heaven has distant signs for me,"¹ for example:

The triumph of the birds
The rapture of concluded day
Returning to the West, -
All these remind us of the place,¹
That men call 'Paradise'.

Notice that Miss Dickinson does not state the Pantheistic doctrine of God in all things; rather "all things" remind her of Him just as they would any thinking person who would take the time to notice a world of natural beauty that no earthly creature could make.

These "distant signs" were proving for Emily Dickinson that the social form of religion, Church-going, was not the only way of finding God. "Beauty is not caused, it is."² and that fact is enough incentive for her to seek God by her own means rather than through man-made patented methods of "hell-fire" sermons or cold doctrines expressing no beauty.

Thrown on her untried resources by her independent nature, Miss Dickinson's path was not without difficulties.

¹
Ibid, p. 55.

²
Ibid, p. 57.

She loved God but true love was not to go an easy way. She had one ally, "Prayer remained on our side."¹ Through prayer, she had asked the Lord to balance her life for her until she was strong enough to balance it herself but once she catches her balance she cries, "It doesn't stay."² What could she do since she felt, "the Churches are so frequent, the ritual so small,"³ that when, "We proclaim religion in Church we cause Embarrassment of one another and God."⁴ The Church did not solve her religious problem with "Much gesture from the pulpit,"⁵ or "strong hallelujah rolls"⁶ because, as she shrewdly observed, "Too much of proof affronts Belief."⁷ Faith, she felt, is belief- not fact or knowledge.

¹ Bianchi and Hampson, Further Poems of Emily Dickinson, p. 171.

² Ibid, p. 45.

³ Ibid, p. 42.

⁴ Todd and Bingham, Bolts of Melody, p.249.

⁵ Ibid, p. 290.

⁶ Bianchi and Hampson, op. cit., p. 50.

⁷ Bianchi and Hampson, op. cit., p. 36.

Miss Dickinson threw a last bolt at the pulpit oratory of her day with:

He preached upon breadth 'til it argued him narrow,
The broad are too broad to define.¹

Man and his creeds had been studied and rejected as mediums through which God and Beauty could be reached. After doubting the dogmas about God, Emily Dickinson had doubts about God Himself emphasized by her troubles with man-made religion. "Heaven is so far of the mind," and religion had no right compelling a man, "to choose himself his pre-appointed path"² of heaven or hell. Another problem not satisfactorily answered was "Is Heaven a place, and sky a face?"³ Granted there was a place called Heaven she could not be sure of happiness there because, "I don't like Paradise" "And in the handsome skies I shall not feel at home" ... "And Eden'll be so lonesome bright Wednesday afternoons."⁴

¹

Ibid, p.36.

²

Bianchi and Hampson, op. cit., p.108.

³

Ibid, p.45.

⁴

Ibid, p.43.

Mixing in a bit of whimsey about "Wednesday afternoons" did not hide her worry and concern about the problem of life after death. Add to these doubts the fact that God did not seem just at times:

It always seemed to me a wrong
To that old Moses done,
To let him see the Canaan
Without the entering.¹

That was a rebellious attitude for a New England Yankee to adopt. She added the sad commentary that God had not listened to her prayers, all that was left her; perhaps He was not even interested in her for:

Of course I prayed -
And did God care?
He cared as much as
On the air
A bird had stamped her foot
And cried "Give me!"²

Unhappy experiences at school, in Church and at prayer hurt her religious nature and left her filled with a "smart misery." Perhaps her feeling of fruitless prayer was akin to human nature that has requested something from God at one time or another and the request has gone unanswered. Despite her setbacks, Miss Dickinson says,

¹
Ibid, p. 46.

²
Ibid, p. 44.

I know that he exists
Somewhere in silence, ¹

but the fact she cannot reconcile is the seeming heartlessness and cruelty of God's game of remaining unknown until after death.

But should the play
Prove piercing earnest
Should the glee glaze
In death's stiff stare,
Would not the fun
Look too expensive?
Would not the jest
Have crawled too far? ²

The spirit of that poem is rebellious but emotionally intense - a crying out as, "Eli, Eli, Lamma sabacthani?" She cried out from the depths, from her spiritual groping, from unrest, "Why make it doubt - it hurts so," and sadly reproached Him, "Oh Master! this is misery!" ³

The revolt had been completed. She became a recluse in her Amherst home, rarely participating in the entertainment of callers, so completely did she cut herself off from the world of affairs. The Impressionists had revolted

¹
Ibid., p. 44.

²
Bianchi, op. cit., p. 45.

³
Bianchi and Hampson, Further Poems of Emily Dickinson, p. 107.

against the pettiness of copying the Classic tradition and had established color as their basic tool in painting. Miss Dickinson had revolted against man-made social customs and man-made religion and had asserted her own society and her own faith in God as her basic tools in life. How she asserted God is the subject of Chapter IV. Revolution was "the pod" from which she would fashion her "system" of solitude and poetry. One of the Impressionists' moves, revolt, had been paralleled. Through poetry and solitude she would express her individuality, the next trait of the Impressionists. Meantime she withdrew from the world whose doctrine she could not abide. Man-made customs and especially man-made religion were too stilted and hampering. She dismissed both in her commentary on religious doctrine:

Is Heaven an exchequer,
 They speak of what we owe:
 But that negotiation
 I'm not a party to. ¹

¹

Todd and Bingham, Bolts of Melody, p. 217.

CHAPTER IV

ASSERTION OF INDIVIDUALISM

Emily Dickinson's nature poetry records some of her happiest moments. From a particular garden Miss Dickinson studied the general subject of nature, the universe. Her plot of Amherst soil becomes New England itself; New England, in turn, becomes the cosmos. Her orchard and garden are a source of microscopic observation on the world of little creatures, flowers, plants, and insects, or telescopic observation of the sky and especially the sun, the beloved object of the Impressionist painters since it was the source of their study of color. She can patiently and good humoredly watch a bird step aside "to let a beetle pass."¹ As a special grace, inebriated with air, she could "lean against the sun."² It is all the same to her. A wonderful world of absorption has welcomed her to myriad experiences in beauty. She had called it "my pageantry."³ She pictures, in verse form, the physical world in every dress. Animals and plants,

¹ Bianchi, Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson, p. 91.

² Bianchi, Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson, p. 14.

³ Todd and Bingham, Bolts of Melody, p. 45.

flowers and stars keenly studied, breathlessly extolled, remind us of a child's rapture at beholding his first Christmas tree. Simply and wonderingly Miss Dickinson approached the phenomena of weather, seasons and creatures, and, just as volubly as the child, she pours forth her heart.

In Bolts of Melody Millicent Todd Bingham makes the happy choice of placing as the first nature poem in the book Miss Dickinson's picture of day creeping into a town and dispelling the night. Perhaps there was an ulterior motive for placing first a poem which says, "I am great and cannot wait, so therefore let me in."¹ That very phrase could very well have been a shrewd appraisal of Miss Dickinson and the whole book of poetry to follow.

Miss Dickinson's pictures of sunrise and its attendant impressions on her mind are an exuberent contrast to the stately, dignified joy of Milton's L' Allegro, for example. The Grand Style gives a courtly picture of a sun that is:

Robed in flame and amber light
The clouds in thousand liveries dight;

¹

Todd and Bingham, Bolts of Melody, p. 11.

whereas Miss Dickinson's ecstatic joy is almost boundless giving us a typically light, whimsical Dickinsonian sunrise in which

The bird did prance, the bee did play,
The sun ran miles away,
So blind with joy he could not choose
Between his holiday;

The morn was up, the meadows out,
The fences all but ran -
Republic of delight, I thought,
Where each is citizen.¹

Contrast the fluid, running effect of Miss Dickinson's lively lines with a static poem of Hilda Doolittle, "H.D." the Imagist, on an extremely mobile and active subject, the sea

Whirl up, sea -
Whirl your pointed pines,
Splash your great pines
On our rocks,
Hurl your green over us
Cover us with your pools of fir.

"H.D.'s" poem is stilted compared with Miss Dickinson's.

According to Louis Untermeyer,

"H.D." is by all odds the most important of the group. She is the most nearly perfect of the Imagists; she is, in fact, the only true Imagist. Whatever her work lacks of vigor or warmth, it lacks because of a predetermined attitude which she never changes. This consistency results in work that is often stiff and sterile, often overweighted with classic literature, but fully as often in poetry that is delicate, fine spun and exquisitely polished."²

1

Ibid, p. 14.

2

Untermeyer, The New Era in American Poetry, p. 298.

Miss Dickinson has often been compared to the Imagist poets by critics; yet biographer Whicher throughout his book states that she did not "exquisitely polish" her verses. In all the quotations used in this thesis not one contains a classical term. Certainly Miss Dickinson's work is not "overweighted with classic literature." Furthermore the vigor, vitality and warmth of Miss Dickinson's poems throughout this thesis will prove that her verse was far from being "stiff and sterile."

Returning once more to Miss Dickinson's New England scene we find that a haze is moving over her Amherst valley in the early morning; then she gives us a glimpse of the sun with a whip in hand:

The sun and fog contested
The government of day.
The sun took down his yellow whip
And drove the fog away.¹

Her personal color scheme abounded with bright colors equal to the brightest of Van Gogh when she adds to the "yellow whip" the fiery red of sunset:

Whole gulfs of red and fleets of red
And crews of red
Did play about the West tonite.²

1

Ibid, p. 141.

2

Ibid, p. 23.

Sisley, Renoir, Jongkind, Gauguin, Van Gogh and Monet had all made studies of nature in ever changing moods just as Miss Dickinson made it her province to do so. The Impressionists' study of "local color" has been credited by John Rewald with giving them a deeper understanding of nature. Like Miss Dickinson they did not "interpret" nature; they merely pictured it. Interpretation was a romantic trait; neither Miss Dickinson nor the Impressionists used the realist insistence on photographic detail of nature.

Nature was no longer an object susceptible of interpretation; it became the direct source of pure sensations, and these sensations could best be reproduced by the technique of small dots and strokes which - instead of insisting on details - retained the general impression in all its richness of color and life.¹

Jongkind's two Views of Notre Dame are good examples of this painting technique as are Monet's fifteen studies of haystacks or Monet's Gare de Nord which pictures a huge, black engine in Paris' North Station. In the latter painting there is not much detail, as Monet sought to give the essence of machinery, not photography of an engine, according to Mr. Rewald. This painting has a striking similarity to Miss Dickinson's essence of all trains "lapping up the miles." Add to this her numerous studies

¹

Rewald, The History of Impressionism, p. 234.

of the "Far Theatricals of Day" which may be compared to the nature pictures of the Impressionists.¹

Quick, natural impressions crowded her mind in which "the lightning is a yellow fork,"² wind "walked as wet as any wave. But swept as dry as sand."³ The rain seemed "a coming as of hosts was heard"⁴ or sunset can fashion cows from clouds and look to her New England eye like "an amber farm."⁵ Night rounds out her long summer's day, observed in a breathlessly quiet mood:

Slow night, that must be watched away
As grain upon a shore,
Too imperceptible to note
Till it be night no more.⁶

¹ Rewald, The History of Impressionism, p. 234.

² Todd and Bingham, Bolts of Melody, p. 17.

³ Ibid, p. 18.

⁴ Ibid, p. 18.

⁵ Ibid, p. 20.

⁶ Ibid, p. 30.

"Our little Kinsmen"¹ was the title Miss Dickinson bestowed on the creatures of her garden. She delighted in capturing on paper their quick changes and carefree antics. Her favorites were the bees who "have a heaven each minute, not any hell."² Yet no creature escaped her observation, not even the lowly angleworm whom she was content to leave, "With modesties enlarged."³ Surprisingly enough, Miss Dickinson did not sentimentalize nature a great deal as the Georgian poetic Impressionists did. Toward nature she adopted a sort of live - and - let - live policy with her poems: For example, there is D.H. Lawrence's Snapdragon:

She laughed, she reached her hand out to the flower
Closing its crimson throat: my own throat in her power
Strangled, my heart swelled up so full
As if it would burst its wineskin in my throat,
Choke me in my own crimson, I watched her pull
The gorge of the gaping flower, till the blood did float
Over my eyes and I was blind.⁴

¹
Ibid., p. 59.

²
Ibid., p. 67.

³
Ibid., p. 59.

⁴
Marsh, Georgian Poetry, p. 113.

Contrast Snapdragon with Miss Dickinson's unsentimental:

A burdock twitched my gown,
Not burdock's blame but mine
Who went too near
The burdock's den.¹

Adopting a Wordsworthian attitude, she can give the
"raison d' etre" of nature's creatures:

Convicted could we be
Of our own minutiae
The smallest citizen that flies
Has more integrity.²

There can be no doubt that Emily Dickinson loved and respected this world, not of men's making, which her garden disclosed to her. Some of her most brilliant and individualized poems are rhapsodies on flowers, insects, animals, weather and seasons. Spiced with homespun terms, her descriptive passages are pleasing to the eye and mind. Far from a heavy Grand Style or tranquil Wordsworthian manner, her fresh and lively images bring new associations to the individual imagination. Her quick picture of summer's end is a sample of her descriptive bent:

The joy his castanet has struck
Put on your muff for winter,
The tippet that ignores his voice
Is infidel to nature.³

1

Todd and Bingham, Bolts of Melody, p. 73.

2

Ibid, p. 78.

3

Ibid, p. 76.

The individual can almost visualize Henry James' treatment of the same theme, "Inasmuch as the bluejay, that infalible harbinger of Summer's close, has indicated with raucous cry, the proximity of Winter, it would be wise to heed his warning and prepare one's winter raiment...." By implication, Miss Dickinson's grasp of essential impressions is quick and colorful.

A bobolink is "too intimate with joy...extrinsic with attention."¹ Another time he is the "rowdy of the meadow"² swaggering lustily. One of her most brilliant bird poems is her graphic characterization of the sparrow, who, having feasted on the ground, flies away:

Invigorated fully,
Turned easy in the sky
As a familiar saddle,
And rode immensity.³

The daring sweep and breath-taking vastness of the last line, "rode immensity," is indicative of a fertile imagination taking an everyday subject and artistically creating an ethereal idea. This touches a fundamental province of the

¹
Ibid, p. 62.

²
Ibid, p. 63.

³
Ibid, p. 64.

Impressionist - the noble treatment of the commonplace as opposed to the "grand style". On this point in Miss Dickinson's work Lewisohn points out that "The creative temper at its truest is always the temper that can make a great deal out of a very little."¹ From the secluded quiet of her Amherst garden, Emily Dickinson created a world of experience from limited personal experience. Nature was her experience. She made use of the sun to give a splendid observation on the whole of nature and the effect it had on her artistic senses. The sun had already captured and intoxicated the Impressionist painters. Miss Dickinson uses the sun for one of the most intense and sustained achievements in all her poetry:

I taste a liquor, never brewed,
 From tankards scooped in pearl;
 Not all the vats along the Rhine
 Yield such an alcohol.

Inebriate of air am I,
 And debauchre of dew,
 Reeling, through endless summer days,
 From inns of molten blue.

¹

Lewisohn, The Story of American Literature, p. 362.

In the first place - the whole treatment of the case is
based on the "good" effect. The idea is that
the "good" effect is the only thing that can be
done for the patient in this case. The doctor has
a very little. From the medical point
of view, the patient is in a very bad state of
health. The doctor has a very little. From the
medical point of view, the patient is in a very bad
state of health. The doctor has a very little.

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health. The doctor has a very little. From the
medical point of view, the patient is in a very bad
state of health. The doctor has a very little.

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When landlords turn the drunken bee
 Out of the foxglove's door,
 When butterflies renounce their drams,
 I shall but drink the more.

Till seraphs swing their snowy hats
 And saints to windows run,
 To see the little tippler¹
 Leaning against the sun.

If the reader follows that poem through and is willing to be carried away, the effect of the closing stanza is tremendous. Archly, she builds up her theme, leads us to the climax, where, startled, we must leap back mentally from the stupendous imagery of a "little tippler leaning against the sun." At this point it is almost possible to hear Emily Dickinson laughing at our discomfiture, the result of her puckish humor. However, she is serious underneath and the daring conception of the last two lines is amazing.²

Unlike another original American genius, Edgar Allen Poe, Miss Dickinson had no need to create a world of phantasms and an equivalent surrealistic geography. She was original enough to use homespun Yankee words to convey her ideas. Her poetry reflected her busy household. She may have had poetic faults, but ponderous word beating or

1

Bianchi, Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson, p. 14.

2

Vincent Van Gogh is supposed to have exhibited this same intoxication with the sun. Hatless under the blazing sun of Southern France, he had painted incessantly and

bookish pedantry were not Dickinsonian traits. Simplicity is one of her truest attributes. She has no need to create a "Ghoul haunted woodland of Weir" or a "dank tarn of Auber." She pictures a real New England world full of its familiar birds and beasts. The dress of a robin is an example of how to sketch an object for a reader in terms easy to grasp. A robin has a

... boot
Adjusted by a stem
Without a button, I could vouch,
Unto a velvet limb.

You'll know her by her vest
Tight fitting, orange brown ...
Her cap is small and snug
Constructed for the wind ...
Nor has it any brim.¹

¹

Todd and Bingham, Bolts of Melody, pp. 64 and 65.

(continued from page 34)

heedlessly trying to capture all its golden elusiveness in his pictures of the brilliant, lush Arlesian countryside. Irving Stone, van Gogh's biographer, declares that the sun even caused van Gogh's final madness. Similarly, Miss Dickinson appreciated the sun almost as much as the Impressionists, as her poem indicates.

Like a woman she has a quick realistic eye for another's dress, even if it is only that of a robin. Another woman's trait is the ability to play hostess. She regards autumn's coming in a singular and individual way. By personal whim she visualizes autumn as a visitor in Amherst whose coming should be prepared for by a dutiful hostess:

The morns are meeker than they were,
The nuts are getting brown;
The berry's cheek is plumper,
The rose is out of town....

The maple wears a gayer scarf,
The field a scarlet gown.
Lest I should be old-fashioned,
I'll put a trinket on.¹

To "put a trinket on" is a typical Yankee term. In her verse the humble and familiar are ever present and honestly treated. Emily Dickinson is neither boasting nor apologizing.

She is expressing her thoughts and world in the only language she felt adequate for them, the language of New England household terms. It was her manner of expressing an individualistic view of the universe. For example, so closely allied to her individualism is the universe that she pictures a sunset as a housewife, a careless one at that:

¹

Bianchi, Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson, p. 124.

She sweeps with many colored brooms,
And leaves the shreds behind;
Oh, housewife in the evening west,
Come back and dust the pond!

You dropped a purple ravelling in,
You dropped an amber thread;
And now you've littered all the East
With duds of emerald!

And still she plies her spotted brooms,
And still the aprons fly,
Till brooms fade softly into stars -
And then I come away.¹

She personifies nature as a tender housewife and mother in a captivating impression:

When all the children sleep
She turns as long away
As will suffice to light her lamps;
Then, bending from the sky,²

Deliberately unconscious, in her work, of the world of men and affairs, she had found a complete universe in her heart and garden. The garden symbolized the extraneous world in which her immediate family could share; but the world of her heart, expressed in poetry, alone, was barred even to her closest companion, her sister Lavinia. This inner self took longer for Emily Dickinson to find. Calmly

¹
Ibid, p. 101.

²
Todd and Bingham, Bolts of Melody, p. 15.

she recognized its existence, and, detachedly at times and emotionally often, she began its cultivation. Formerly her garden had been the whole world to her, but now:

"I thought that nature was enough

Till human nature came."¹

Byron, Shelley, Hawthorne, James, Irving and Longfellow, men of English and American letters, sought escape of one sort or another. All asserted an independent spirit but none more daringly, perhaps, save Byron and Shelley, than Emily Dickinson. Quietly, she stood apart and lived in a world of her own choosing and suited to her liking:

Rich! 'Twas myself was rich!
To take the mane of gold,
And gold to own in solid bars -
The difference made me bold. ²

Boldly she asserted her philosophy of an individual's right to live his own life, and boldly she flouted the niceties of Victorian verseform. She had asked Thomas Wentworth Higginson for good Victorian advice and politely she had ignored that advice. Blithely, she went her own poetic way. Here was an independent craftsman who refused to compromise her art to any worldly standards. She would

¹

Todd and Bingham, Bolts of Melody, p. 80.

²

Ibid, p. 84.

continue to use her own meters and household terms.

Human nature, especially her own, became the focal point of her poetic chronicle. Emotions, thoughts and the significance of life and death were some of the ideas she impersonally at times but always curiously turned over in her mind. The results of her mental problems or sensations are left to us in poetic form. At times there is a note of mysticism and metaphysics in her work, and again symbolism is apparent, but, over all, her poetry about the life within is extremely personal and impressionistic. No two critics can agree on interpretations of a great many poems; hence it is obvious that she lacks the clarity essential to become one of the Imagist group. The metaphysical style of John Donne perhaps exists in:

A death blow is a life-blow to some
Who, till they died, did not alive become;
Who, had they lived, had died, but when
They died, vitality begun.¹

That play on words similar to Donne's explained the renunciation of her love with whom, after death, she hoped there would be life. She uses "little things" to symbolize life and death matters in this world in:

¹

Bianchi, Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson, p. 204.

It's such a little thing to weep,
 So short a thing to sigh;
 And yet by trades the size of these
 We men and women die! ¹

She states an Impressionist doctrine of fact that the individual's mood determines whether or not phenomena of the world are sad or gay; almost a parody of Wordsworth exists in the poem about the oriole's song in which Miss Dickinson says:

The fashion of the ear
 Attireth that it hear
 In dun or fair.

So whether it be rune,
 Or whether it be none,
 Is of within. ²

This theme of the individual's mood or the spirit of the moment determining the artist's creation is discussed by John Rewald in connection with the paintings of Renoir and Monet; however, the idea applies to practically all the Impressionists.

The surfaces of their canvases were thus covered with a vibrating tissue of small dots and strokes, none of which by itself defined any form, yet all of which contributed to recreate not only the particular feature of the chosen motif but even more the sunny

¹
Ibid, p. 50.

²
Ibid, p. 83.

air that bathed it and marked trees, grass, houses or water with¹ the specific character of the day, if not the hour.

Again and again Miss Dickinson writes a biography of herself in her poetry as a shy little girl "who could not bear to live aloud...the racket shamed me so."²

¹

Rewald, The History of Impressionism, p. 234.

Excellent paintings indicative of this fashioning from a personal mood or mood dictated by the day are: Country Lane - Gauguin and Terrace at the Seaside - Monet.

Country Lane shows a brown path approaching the viewer from a quiet green background of shade into a golden bright green foreground, lush and warm creating a cheerful effect, and one of fluid natural healthiness. It is reminiscent of Miss Dickinson's poem quoted on p. 25, "The morn was up, the meadows out, The fences all but ran." There is no fence visible in Gauguin's painting, but the white clouds overhead and the grass and sun give every indication of running they are so alive.

Terrace at the Seaside Near Le Havre is a contrast to Gauguin's vigorous canvas. In this painting dominant red flowers, green sea and blue sky are flooded with a golden sunshine that suggests a warm afternoon with sea breezes stiffening flags reminding one of siesta time or the quiet of a pleasant secluded haven for purposes of rest. This painting has captured the "specific character of the day, if not the hour" with simple, unadorned grace.

²

Todd and Bingham, Bolts of Melody, p. 101.

She was essentially a serious person pre-occupied frequently with death and "death's tremendous nearness."¹ Life was serious, usually, too, but not to be taken to heart:

Earth at the best
Is but a scanty toy.²

Never serious overlong, however, she could make the most of happy occasions; and in one burst of enthusiasm on a particularly good day she declared that if all her griefs came that day "They'd laugh and run away."³ Spring was always an optimistic time, and her good mood is reflected in:

The moderate drinker of delight
Does not deserve the Spring.⁴

This bright bit of exuberance we again offset in another mood when Miss Dickinson recalls her lost love and reminisces:

How happy I was if I could forget
To remember how sad I am.⁵

¹
Ibid, p. 105.

²
Ibid, p. 107.

³
Ibid, p. 107.

⁴
Ibid, p. 108.

⁵
Ibid, p. 112.

She emphasizes her loss with:

Had I not seen the sun
I could have borne the shade;
But light a newer wilderness,¹
My wilderness has made.

The variety of her personal experience was enough to make her satisfied with her lot and her life of retirement. Aptly she sums it up with "I had the glory - that will do."²

Emily Dickinson was not making riddles; she was indicating that she had tasted most worldly associations or triumphs but that they were not enough. Her nature craved something other than ordinary things in life. She had been to Washington for a several weeks' stay and had met many nationally important people. She had been in love; had several young male admirers. She had been an integral part of Amherst social functions. Emily Dickinson had tasted all this - yet, her world of heart and garden offered more:

I knew that I had gained
And yet I knew not how. ³

¹
Ibid, p. 115.

²
Ibid, p. 116.

³
Ibid, p. 117.

That is her way of choosing seclusion over society. Later poems indicate that she was satisfied with her choice. Poetry was a better gift than all the rest, she proclaimed, with

In thy long paradise of light
No moment will there be
When I shall long for¹ earthly play
And mortal company.

She had asserted an individual nature and chose a life different from the ordinary. Poetry became her first love and the many scraps of it left to posterity attest that she pursued her vocation with zest. In fact, so satisfied and happy in this life of retirement was she that Miss Dickinson asked the Lord to extend her mortal lease with the little quatrain:

Some wretched creature, Savior take,
Who will exult to die,
And leave for thy sweet mercy's sake
Another hour to me!²

¹

Todd and Bingham, Bolts of Melody, p. 123.

²

Ibid, p. 125.

That poetic outburst is significant because Miss Dickinson displayed absolute belief that she was following her individual star according to Divine ordinance, a striking similarity to the will to paint in his own way, that a Van Gogh, a Monet or a Cezanne displayed. Individuality was the touchstone of each, and art came first. Miss Dickinson had placed art before "mortal company" and in a passionate moment had asked the Lord to prolong that happy art and life.

It was obvious that she had exercised freedom of choice, qualified a little by extenuating circumstances. Liberty, however, was a sacred word to her. In a poem about the deaths of General Wolfe and Montcalm she has Montcalm say as he lay dying:

"Sweet," said he, "my own surrender
Liberty's forestall."¹

She had obtained liberty in her personal life and kept it in her verse forms. She had accepted the individuality of a real original artist - nothing more was necessary.

Love, the greatest emotion, must have been lacking, and it was the only door closed to Emily Dickinson. Three biographers name three different individuals as the possible object of her affections. Who the man was is subject for

¹
Ibid, p. 130.

historical dispute. Her love for him, renunciation, and resignation are constant themes in her poetry. These themes are important. The essence of her whole love affair and poignant emotions related to it are laid bare in her poems. Love was the emotion for which she would receive no earthly return; "Robbed was I, yet met no bandit."¹ The emotion, itself, was an excellent source of new ideas for her sensitive imagination to create and afforded a wealth of material as ... alive, twofold, the birth² I had, and this besides in thee.

This unknown love gave Miss Dickinson a whole new perspective even on her beloved nature:

I sight the Aprils,
Hueless to me until thou come;"³

or he made her blind to all else, even nature,

I look on all this world contains-
Just his face - nothing more!⁴

¹
Ibid, p. 139.

²
Todd and Bingham, Bolts of Melody, p. 140.

³
Ibid, p. 141.

⁴
Ibid, p. 142.

Emily Dickinson had definitely personalized her poetry when love came along. Impressionism had personalized painting; here was a good example of personalized poetry. Miss Dickinson crowded all her intense emotions, joy and heartbreak, into her too short experience of love;

I'd give to live that hour¹ again
The purpae in my vein.

So engrossed was she in the welfare of this wonderful person that even poetry was for once pushed into a place of secondary importance, since she declared:

Let my first knowing be of thee
With morning's warming light,
And my first fearing, lest unknowns
Engulf thee in the night.²

The reader has an air of guilt or sense of prying when he examines the tenderness of this woman's feelings laid bare. Emily Dickinson's love lyrics are poems of great beauty touched with sadness, exposing the one vulnerable spot in her safe world of heart and garden. It is a tribute to her stature as an artist that these poems do not stoop to maudlin sentimentality. Honest affection and a woman's motherly instinct appear in

¹
Ibid, p. 142.

²
Ibid, p. 145.

Wert thou but ill that I may show¹ thee
How long a day I could endure.

Renunciation and resignation to the fact that her love would be unfulfilled are apparent also:

'Twas my one glory -
Let it be
Remembered
I was owned of thee.²

She found that giving up a man one loved was hard:

To die without the dying
And live without the life -
This is the hardest miracle
Propounded to belief.³

Yet, Emily Dickinson lived out her miracle married to no one save her art, which she compromised to no man and no doctrine. She had a thoroughbred's spirit and came from stern Yankee stock. The hurt was within and it was big:

To break so vast a heart
Required a blow as vast;
No zepher felled this cedar straight,
'Twas undeserved blast.⁴

¹
Ibid, p. 165.

²
Ibid, p. 168.

³
Ibid, p. 175.

⁴
Ibid, p. 175.

Whoever the mysterious lover was and why he left are unknown, but the depths and heights Miss Dickinson's poetic soul could reach were immortally painted in literature known to all posterity.

There can be no doubt that this unhappy event in her life greatly aided Miss Dickinson's choice to live alone and like it. Her verse acknowledges the fact that the world was not worth much after love was denied:

When one has given up one's life
The parting with the rest
Feels easy. ¹

It is impossible to ignore the fact that Emily Dickinson placed her heart on paper for all to see; an emotional and highly personal form of verse such as this fulfills the elemental traits of Impressionism. Some poetic impressions we can understand, some are doubtfully interpreted, and some will never be understood. The essence of love is placed before us, from the depths to the heights in a personalized manner that is akin to Impressionism. From the sad resignation of her heart all that is left to her is hope:

¹
Ibid, p. 177.

To wait an hour is long
 If love be just beyond:
 To wait eternity is short,
 If love be at the end. ¹

A reader's sympathy would be wasted on such an optimistic nature. Emily Dickinson was not a person to indulge in self-pity or ask for sympathy.

After love had run its course, two important subjects, always in her poetry, came to the fore again: God and Death. Death seemed cold at first and she examined it with detached curiosity. She shuddered, wondering at the hair's difference between life and death. For example, in the poem about the drowning man clutching for a spar:

To fail within a chance
 How terrible a thing
 Then perish from the chances list
 Before the perishing! ²

Poets before her and poets after her treated the subject of death but few have examined it with such individual curiosity, such detailed observation in so concise a space as her little rhymes permit.

¹
Ibid, p. 157.

²
Ibid, p. 185.

Capture the essence, do not garnish, do not embellish are good slogans for the style employed by Emily Dickinson in forming her unique style. No ornateness nor elaboration need be added to her graphic description of death's effect on life:

The vastest earthly day
Is shrunken small
By one defaulting face
Behind a pall.¹

From the more general aspect of death she had personal experiences such as the death of her mother, "That dear frame the years had worn,"² of whom she wondered, "Are ye then with God?"³ The closer she herself comes to death the less fear there is of it, Miss Dickinson discovers; "How firm eternity must look to crumbling men like me."⁴ Then as she approaches death closer her foot becomes firmer for, "Eternity is ample."⁵ Miss Dickinson feels that it is not far from life to death at all, since "His house is but a

¹ Todd and Bingham, Bolts of Melody, p. 192.

² Ibid, p. 195.

³ Ibid, p. 195.

⁴ Ibid, p. 215.

⁵ Ibid, p. 218.

step."¹ In the meantime, she had to think about God and reassured herself that Heaven existed:

Of Paradise' existence
All we know
Is the uncertain certainty.
But its vicinity infer
By its bisecting,²
Messenger.

Death was the messenger closely allied to God; so she felt a bond with God, death and eternity, never felt before:

The infinite a sudden guest
Has been assumed to be,
But how can that stupendous³ come
Which never went away?

Her parting observation on the whole scheme of things was:

If my bark sinks
'Tis to another sea.
Mortality's ground floor⁴
Is immortality.

Her examples of clipped poetic style are a special technique.

"There is no poet in American literature of whom it is so accurate to say that the poet is the poetry."⁵

¹
Ibid, p. 220.

²
Ibid, p. 221.

³
Ibid, p. 223.

⁴
Ibid, p. 223.

⁵
Tate, The Outlook, Aug. 15, 1928.

is Alan Tate's observation on Emily Dickinson's verse. Impressionistic painters developed a highly personal and individual technique. Emily Dickinson developed the same traits in poetry. She omits the "hearts and flowers" of Romantic poetry as well as the Classic imitation of the "Grand Style". Her fresh style and treatment of commonplace subjects are the stamps of a rare talent employed by an original genius. Poetry is stripped bare of furbelows as she captures the essence of her subject in true Yankee economy. Virile combinations, daring imagery, and vivid, homelike scenes make this austere poetry attractive. Emily Dickinson is not a follower, she is a leader. Perhaps here she is allied most closely to Emerson's idea of self reliance. No school existed to instruct her in this unadorned style of seeing "New Englandly". She is a pioneer in poetry as Millet and Monet were pioneers in painting. She ignored the classic yoke just as they did; on her own, she perfected the poetic craft that would best express what she wished to say. From her heart and garden, she produced a liberal poetry entirely unhampered by past practices and inflexible rules. If it had been published in her lifetime, her poetic license would have rocked stuffy Victorian conservatism.

Reading her verse in private, Stephen Crane and William Dean Howells alone recognized this frugal beauty coming from equally frugal New England. Lewisohn notes:

The wonder is not that she was a great poet amid the poverty and narrowness of her experiences; the wonder is that there was born in that Amherst house so great a poet that she needed only that house and the seasons and a few books and one supreme and unfulfilled passion to make her one of the very few great women poets of all literature. ¹

Emily Dickinson's heart and garden, her spiritual and physical worlds, were sufficient sources of material to proclaim her an individual poetic genius. Withdrawal from the society of men and affairs was her quiet, independent, one woman revolt against associations and affiliations which she considered unnecessary. "After all," she observed, "the obloquies of etiquette are obsolete to bliss."²

¹

Lewisohn, The Story of American Literature, pp.362-363.

²

Todd and Bingham, Bolts of Melody, p. 332.

CHAPTER V

GOD AND EMILY TRIUMPHANT

The topics, death, immortality and God were obvious sources of poetic study for Miss Dickinson's restless fancy. These great subjects appealed to her as taking out for examination life which, "is over there behind the shelf"¹ Life, Death; Immortality and God were intermingled, interdependent and ever present in her verse. These problems would not let her rest. It was as though, "Heaven beguiles the tired."² God was part of the staff of life for New Englanders. As we have shown, Miss Dickinson could not believe in God through the formal agency of religion. She had need to find Him as the source of her world. He was essential as the foundation subject of her poetic craft just as color was the foundation of the Impressionist's craft. How Miss Dickinson's search for God reached its triumphant conclusion is one of the most interesting and important chapters in her life. Her poetry is the record of this important theme.

¹

Bianchi and Hampson, Poems of Emily Dickinson, p. 17.

²

Todd and Bingham, Bolts of Melody, p. 216.

Cautiously, she tried to find God. Church doctrines were not for her; so it was essential to own a personal God. She is like the Prodigal returning when she asks Him:

Savior! I've no one else to tell
And so I trouble Thee,
I am the one forgot Thee so. ¹
Dost Thou remember me?

Her faith is strong and cannot be denied because she has to recognize it as the "tooth that nibbles at the soul."² She felt that the loss of faith was about the worst thing that could happen to man. It is far worse than losing one's earthly possessions, "Because states can be replenished - faith cannot."³ God and immortality so colored the mind and work of Emily Dickinson that it was necessary for her to be assured of His existence and also of the existence of faith in salvation after death. Blind, unquestioning faith did not suit her penetrating mind. She was stubborn in her search for the light, and success crowned her effort.

¹

Bianchi, Further Poems of Emily Dickinson, p. 188.

²

Todd and Bingham, Bolts of Melody, p. 290.

³

Bianchi, Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson, p. 64.

"The only One I meet is God,"¹ and "The only news I know is bulletins all day from Immortality" were views that she reached by following her own conscience. How she arrived at her great triumph is difficult to conjecture. Looking again to her poetry, she added, "Instinct reports Him Immortality."² The poems of Miss Dickinson's later life or, at least, those in the handwriting of the latest period, since it is difficult to put her poems in chronological order, abound in happy references to a world hereafter such as,

How firm eternity must look
To crumbling men like me. ³

or,

"Faith is the pierless bridge"⁴ which supports this world and links it with the world hereafter. Without the "bridge of faith the world is just "a pit, with heaven over it."⁵

¹

Bianchi, Further Poems of Emily Dickinson, p. 115.

²

Bianchi, Further Poems of Emily Dickinson, p. 117.

³

Todd and Bingham, Bolts of Melody, p. 215.

⁴

Ibid, p. 129.

⁵

Ibid, p. 270.

When faith had finally been assured and she had passed her time of doubts, she looked ahead with satisfaction and confidence for: "Behind me dips Eternity, before me, Immortality."¹ Emily Dickinson had labored alone, cut off from man-made religion, had labored in the dark until she was sure of her God. Biographer Whicher sums it all up thus:

Emily Dickinson without leaving her sheltered garden had drifted on a vaster stream than Huckleberry Finn ever knew, and her watchword was like his 'Trust in the unexpected.' Valor in the dark she acknowledged as her Maker's code. Sophocles long ago, facing the perplexities of the human lot, had found no better solution.²

Her faith was sound and she expressed it earnestly "Eternity is ample so trust him, comrade!"³ She strengthened her conviction of Heaven's existence, picturing it as a place "Whose sun constructs the perpetual noon."⁴ So

¹ Bianchi and Hampson, Further Poems of Emily Dickinson, p. 191.

² Whicher, This Was a Poet, p. 308.

³ Todd and Bingham, Bolts of Melody, p. 218.

⁴ Ibid, p. 218.

interwoven with nature was her idea of life and God the medium with which she chose to picture Heaven was the medium of nature, Heaven was a place of constant sunshine. Again she mentions the sun "There is a sun" for "Those who suffer now;"¹ God is the sun here relieving the oppressed in the next world. She has taken the focal point of the Impressionist painter, the sun, as the epitome of her own faith. It is the center of that great place in the world hereafter where "Creatures clad in miracle go up by two and two."² As she grew older, more serene in her faith more independent of mind and set in her way of life, Miss Dickinson felt that this world meant less and less in comparison to eternity,

The only adamant estate,³
In all identity.

From the privacy of her garden, she raised herself to ask humbly of the Lord a share in Immortality of which she was now certain.

¹
Ibid., p.217.

²
Ibid., p.215.

³
Ibid., p.215.

Thou stirrest earthquake in the South
 And maelstrom in the sea;
 Say, Jesus of Nazareth,¹
 Hast thou no arm for me?

Secure in her faith, she could scale the heights
 following His footsteps:

Eternity, I'm coming, Sir,-
 Master, I've seen that face before.²

Her power of expression is so intense that she had no need for a wider scope of worldly experience to enhance the beauty of her verses. The magic of her poetry lies in its star-struck lyricism. It has all the enchantment of Gauguin's Tahitian landscapes, bathed in tropic sunshine, breathing romantic hints of far off paradise. In her austere verse-form this "Tippler" daring to lean "against the sun" has almost out-soared in ethereal minstrelsy the idealism of Shelley. It is incredible that a practical, common sense Yankee could have achieved such brilliant flights of fancy.

God had won a positive place in the mind and poetry of Emily Dickinson. The next person she had to analyze and evaluate in order to live at peace with was herself.

¹
Ibid., p. 218.

²
Ibid., p. 218.

If ever there was a person in literary history who was completely an individualist and a self-sufficient entity, Emily Dickinson is such a one. Miss Dickinson had retreated from the Amherst social sphere and had disregarded poetic doctrines. Either action was an indication of a will demanding to be entirely free. She found a whole world behind the hedges of her garden and another within herself. "Know thyself" was a doctrine adhered to possibly without her being conscious of it. She could be compared to the verse in Ecclesiastes:

"As long as thou livest, and hast
breath in thee, let no man change thee."

No one could change her way of life, and she did not let Thomas Wentworth Higginson change a line of her poetry although she had asked his advice about it. Her world was with the gentian, the bee, the bobolink and immortality. She was extremely happy with her way of life. Nature's distractions had often soothed her unbridled emotion. "Never for society one shall seek in vain."¹ She had thrived, "independent as the sun" in "casual simplicity"²

¹ Bianchi and Hampson, Further Poems of Emily Dickinson, p. 394.

² Ibid, p. 79.

with the result that her "acre of rock yielded grape and maize"¹ as she modestly put it. To a very few mortals is this grace granted, that of achieving so much with so little. It is an undeniable trait of genius. "How much the present moment means"² could be the key to her whole philosophy:

In this short life
That only lasts an hour,
How much, how little,³
Is within our power!

Miss Dickinson indicated that a formidable amount was within the limit of her capacity. One should not use so qualifying a word as "limit" in dealing with her poetic practice. It is presumption and should be avoided when ascertaining the greatness of a poet who could assent boldly, "My basket holds just firmaments."⁴ She had no doubt where her poetry was leading her. It was her all - her life. She said that the only time she would stop

¹
Ibid, p. 79.

²
Todd and Bingham, Bolts of Melody, p. 266.

³
Ibid, p. 266.

⁴
Ibid, p. 306.

writing verse was when death called her. Of course her phrasing was more subtle:

If I should cease to take the names
My bards commemorate,
'T will be because death's¹ finger
Clasps my murmuring lip.

She fulfilled her promise, "I could bring you jewels."² Her poetic gems spoke for her to all time that a person can be a New England spinster engaged in homespun tasks and still weave magic from a fertile mind. The type of jewel Emily Dickinson left for posterity is enduring. Let Miss Dickinson express for us just what she found in her world:

Witchcraft was hung in history;
But history and I
Find all the witchcraft that we need
Around us every day.³

That should stand for all time as answer to the unbeliever, "distant pastures look greener" but one can find magic in everyday life, incredible as it may seem. To bolster her point, she adds,

Contained in this short life
Are magical extents,⁴

¹

Todd and Bingham, Bolts of Melody, p. 333.

²

Ibid, p. 328.

³

Ibid, p. 290.

⁴

Ibid, p. 265.

which are evident to those who love life and wish to take advantage of these offerings. Emily Dickinson enjoyed life, saying "That it will never come again is what makes life so sweet."¹

Poetry was her reason for existing in this world and there can be no doubt that in her magic world of fancies, images and desires she discovered "a fortune exterior to time."²

Of her calling she truthfully acknowledges that:

The poets light but₃ lamps
Themselves go out;

yet,

Such are the inlets of the mind
His outlets would you see,
Ascend with me the table-land
Of immortality.⁴

Her kind invitation to immortality does not miss the mark by far. There were not such great distances between the soaring sentiments of her poetry and the skies that poetry sought to climb. Her poetic light flashed intermittently as she clutched for the stars of inspiration,

¹

Ibid, p. 265.

²

Bianchi and Hampson, op. cit., p. 12.

³

Todd and Bingham, op. cit., p. 227.

⁴

Ibid, p. 228.

sometimes grasping, sometimes only touching and sometimes missing them. She knew the problems of her chosen work. Impressions were flitting will-o-the-wisps that had to be observed and recorded almost immediately, for

To see the summer sky
Is poetry
Though never in a book it lie. ¹
True poems flee.

Granted that she pursued a phantom business, Miss Dickinson considered her fate a fortunate one, because "He has not lived who has not felt."² She felt intensely many of the beautiful impressions she had sought to capture in her poems. Poetry had been her choosing, her playmate, her fashioned "objet d' art". According to Van Wyck Brooks

She sometimes took a mischievous pleasure in extravagant combinations of thought, writing the droll and the sublime, the trivial and the grand. There was in this an element of the characteristic American humour that liked to play with incongruities. ³

¹

Todd and Bingham, Bolts of Melody, p. 230.

²

Ibid, p. 287.

³

Brooks, New England Indian Summer, p. 328.

"Playing with incongruities" how characteristically that phrase describes her whole makeup, one moment serious, the next playing tricks. Nevertheless, serious or light, Emily Dickinson summed up her work in a practical Yankee fashion that places beyond all doubt the station a poet held in her estimation.

I reckon, when I count at all,
First Poets - then the Sun -
Then Summer - then the
Heaven of God -
And then the list is done.
But looking back - the first so seems
To comprehend the whole -
The others look a needless show,¹
So I write Poets - All.

¹

Bianchi, Further Poems of Emily Dickinson, p. 11.

CHAPTER VI

IMPRESSIONISM IN HER POETRY

A. Freedom of Expression

Impressionism had a wide scope; it could be coolly impersonal as, Seurat's cold dots of paint and Cezanne's squares of bright color or highly individualized as, Van Gogh's self portraits and Gauguin's Tahitian landscapes of later times. In either case, freedom of expression, unfettered and unencumbered by convention or doctrine, was deliberately pursued. Emily Dickinson combined both the personal and impersonal traits in her poetic experiments. As a whole, her impressionism was personal, autobiographical growing like Topsy unregardful of formulas or the sanctions of authority. The whole world could be portrayed in the familiar setting of her New England countryside. She took the liberty of painting the universe from her own point of view.

Here were the hills, the changing seasons, the winter light, the light of spring, the bee, the mouse, the humming bird, the cricket, the lonely house off the road, the village inn, the lamp-post that became, in the play of her fancy, sublime or droll; and with what gifts of observation she caught the traits of her birds and insects, or everything that crept or ran or flew, - the snake "unbraiding in the sun", the robin's eyes, "like frightened beads", the umbrella of the bat that was "quaintly halved".¹

¹ Brooks, *op. cit.*, p. 327.

There can be no doubt that interpretation of nature was deeply personal. One of the definitions concerning the Impressionist painters states that "Rejecting the objectivity of realism, they had selected one element from reality - light - to interpret all of nature."¹ Emily Dickinson's verse was certainly an expression of her world in an "element from reality". The element of expression was her household vocabulary. Mr. Brooks supplements the definition of impressionism when he says: "She domesticated the universe and read her own experience into the motions of nature and the world she observed."²

Not only did Miss Dickinson assert herself by freedom in expression of thought, but linked inseparably to thought was her mode of expression. She used a provincial vocabulary mixed with Biblical and legal phrasings plus new rhythms and twists in rhymes. The study of rhyme is in itself a technical one and would require much time and painstaking exposition for which the author has neither the knowledge nor space to write. Mr. Whicher, however, gives excellent detailed explanation of Emily Dickinson's mechanical tendencies.³

¹ Rewald, The History of Impressionism, p. 272.

² Brooks, op. cit., 327.

³ Whicher, This Was a Poet, pp. 243-249.

It is doubtful if there was another poet in the language, excepting a dialectitian, perhaps, who so deliberately made use of these approximations. That was her newness in the language. She could not have been ignorant of good usage as some critics would make us believe. She corresponded all the while with Higginson, who must have kept her aware of her shortcomings. The writer believes, as Mr. Whicher points out, that she did it deliberately and, if anything, her fondness for approximately rhyme increased through the years. Her lack of concern for rules often led Emily Dickinson to make many errors of grammar, meter and rhyme. In the interests of truth it is sufficient to observe that she made these errors. However, she compromised her language in order not to compromise her ideas. Just as the Impressionist painters used colors, composition, form and line to suit their individuality, so, too, did Miss Dickinson use rhyme, meter, form and assonance to fit her thoughts. Too many critics waste valuable time pointing to the glaring and obvious errors in the mechanics of Emily Dickinson's poetry and not enough time in consideration of her intentions in committing those errors. She knowingly committed them; accept this fact at its face value. If her intense thoughts and feelings could not be written in verse form, then they would be written anyway

and damn the verse forms.

Many of her vowel and consonant rhymes were attributed to hymn books of her day, as Mr. Whicher points out; others were the result of her poetic intention. Natural cadence often replaced meter. There were experimenters in rhyme long before Emily Dickinson, and there have been many since, but few have aroused such a storm of controversy. It is obvious that Miss Dickinson wrote her poetry as self-expression with the mode of expression of secondary importance. The surprising feature is the fact that her poetry is natural and unaffected without artificiality or forced rhyming.

Her emphasis of feeling and indifference to form are an indication of her mental vitality that would not be curbed. Her energy is a challenge to the reader; she dares anyone to follow her elusive train of thought, leaping from idea to idea, universal in treatment of subject matter and subtle in meaning. The value of her poetry rests with the reader. If the reader accepts the challenge and follows Emily Dickinson's poetic star, the reward is rich. If, however, an indifferent reader ignores her whimsy, poignancy and daring in favor of mechanical perfection, the result is tragic - an indication of a lack of understanding on the reader's part. As Van Wyck Brooks maintains, "For Emily

Dickinson's light was quick. It was sudden, sharp, and evanescent; and this light was the dry light that is closest to fire."¹ To follow that light the reader discovers she showed energy of spirit and mind that only the rarest poets possessed and that "Her style, her stamp, her form were completely her own."²

Miss Dickinson's sensations obviously were not second hand or steeped in classical invention but sprang from a fiercely intuitive and mystic mind that was a law unto itself. Despite the subjective emphasis in her work, she could still take time out coolly and impersonally to examine, "a thought went up my mind today."³ Her work is a study in contrasts, a study of logic opposed to intuition. As a woman's prerogative, Emily Dickinson emphasized the intuitive faculty. In her singular style she poured forth her heart in tumultuous appraisal of Life, Love, God, Nature, and Death, every subject the fingertips of her searching mind could reach. She liberated her surging spirit and consuming passion in swift, exuberent strokes of her pen.

¹ Brooks, op. cit., p. 326.

² Ibid, p. 328.

³ Bianchi and Hampson, Further Poems of Emily Dickinson, p. 27.

B. Impressions

The wealth of Emily Dickinson's poetry and variety of subject matter provide an equal abundance of poetic impressions. She possessed the intellectual curiosity of Monet with the unique individuality of Van Gogh, Renoir and Cezanne. Cezanne said; "It is only the initial force, i.e., temperament, that can carry one to the goal that one is seeking."¹ There can be no doubt from the intensity of Miss Dickinson's emotions, indelibly stamped into her work, that she had the "initial force" to carry through to her goal. This force caused crudity and poor work at times yet her over-all brilliance offset her errors. As we said before, this inner drive compelled her to ignore the rules of perfect meter much to Higginson's chagrin, and this deliberate indifference to rules places Emily Dickinson in a realm distinct from that of realism or imagism. Imagism was exact in its stress of technique; Miss Dickinson placed technique second. Realism was primarily interested in exact photography, portraying the thing as it actually is. As we have seen, Miss Dickinson portrayed her world as it appeared to her household mind. Hence, the claim that she

¹

Lewisohn, S., Painters and Personalities, p. 86.

that she stood apart as an impressionist, distinct from the Georgian poet school of impressionism. Nature was their province often viewed in a sentimental vein as indicated by D.H. Lawrence's Meeting Among the Mountains. In this poem the author uses a background of pansies, bees and cold night to discuss his sadness when thinking about Christ Crucified. When Miss Dickinson uses nature she pictures nature alone; when she wants to talk about sadness she talks about sadness and does not mix the two subjects. Contrast Miss Dickinson's gay moon "sliding down the stairs" with Walter de la Mare's "lovely moon" and "dreamy boy", gazing at each other in his poem Full Moon. Then James Stephens' picture of the poor little rabbit caught in The Snare is absolutely nauseating. The poem ends with the author unable to locate the crying creature:

And I cannot find the place
Where the paw is in the snare:
Little one! Oh, little one!
I am searching everywhere! ¹

Miss Dickinson was seldom sentimental about nature. Furthermore nature was only a part of her poetic world, since Life, Death and God received an equal share of attention. Her impressions could be categorized under

¹

Marsh, E.M., Georgian Poetry, 1913-15. p. 190.

those headings. Here are some obvious impressions in Emily Dickinson's poetry:

LIFE - The value of privacy, and the right to choose one's own freedom

The soul selects her own society,
Then shuts the door,
On her divine majority¹
Obtrude no more.

Concerning life itself she said, "Life is shorter than summer,"² and "Uncertain lease develops luster on time,"³ so that we try to crowd all our experiences in, since "Seventy years is spent as quick as an only dollar."⁴ To prove that she was a practical Yankee and bore no illusion about this short life she maintained; "Peace is a fiction of our faith."⁵

Turning from this shrewd appraisal of man, society and ideas, we consider Webster's definition of impressionism:

¹ Bianchi, Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson, p. 89.

² Todd and Bingham, Bolts of Melody, p. 267.

³ Ibid, p. 267.

⁴ Ibid, p. 67.

⁵ Ibid, p. 278.

"(Impressionism) - in literature, depiction of scene, emotion, or character with broad simplicity and little elaboration of detail." Here, in nature, Emily Dickinson is truly on her own. She depicts her scenes with "little elaboration" and a profound simplicity and honesty. Her poetry certainly does not belong to the moralizing school of nature poetry as Bryant's To a Waterfowl or Holmes' Chambered Nautilus. Here, too, she leaves behind another New England poet, with whom her name is often linked, Emerson. Biographer Whicher points out that

In Emerson's view, . . . nature and men were both partial reflections of the Divine Essence or Over-Soul, the One with the Many, whereas Emily Dickinson was hardly touched by this mystical doctrine of transcendentalism in nature, and the beautiful pageant of the external world thrilled her senses, but not to the point of intruding upon her identity. She could point out an occasional analogy between nature and man without implying a complete₁ correspondence of the natural and the human.

¹ Whicher, This Was a Poet, p. 266.

NATURE

Nature was a complete spirit in itself giving impressions of "The moon slides down the stair"¹ or one can see that "A rose is an estate."² She has not seen the decay of New England; therefore her poetry does not contain the repressed sadness of Robert Frost's North of Boston, for example. Nature and life were full, virile things, unlimited, not bound by the belief that "Good fences make good neighbors" or decaying like a "mending wall" that needs mending annually. This boundless vitality is expressed in her observation of leaves:

How everlasting are the lips
Known only to the dew!
These are the brides of³ permanence,
Supplanting me and you.

She acquaints us with the quick vitality and beauty of nature with a verse like

The fairest home I knew
Was founded in an hour
By parties also that I knew,⁴
A spider and a flower.

¹ Bianchi, Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson, p. 11.

² Todd and Bingham, Bolts of Melody, p. 331.

³ Ibid, p. 327.

⁴ Ibid, p. 301.

In such poems she leaves out the obvious moral that all worldly things will perish quickly nor does she drag in God and man, relating them with Nature as a Transcendentalist might do. Miss Dickinson is content to give us the quick, pulsing beauty of the observation just as it came to her at that moment.

For the moralists or symbolists she recalls natural changes as a beautiful picture that time nor man can stay, but man can remember them at least. There is no romantic moaning about the irretrievable past in this fresh picture:

I'd rather recollect a setting
Than own a rising sun -
Though one is beautiful forgetting
And real the other one.

Because in going is a drama
Staying cannot confer;
To die divinely once a twilight
Than live is easier. ¹

In other words, "Parting is such sweet sorrow" plus Miss Dickinson's old theme recurring, that we never appreciate anything fully until it is gone. Her quiet resignation shows a mature mind at peace with God and self in this age-old problem to man. She has caught the essence of poetry without delving into the details of science and technique.

¹

Todd and Bingham, Bolts of Melody, p. 291

A sunset can move her to a quick, Dickinsonian
impression of sibilant,

Soft as the massacre of suns
By evening's sabres slain. ¹

All nature was her friend and she delicately pictured her
relationship to nature's people as strictly personal:

The bee is not afraid of me,
I know the butterfly;
The pretty people in the woods
Receive me cordially. ²

This world was filled with color, "a peacock's purple
train," a rainbow coming from the fair," or the "silver
mists" of a summer's day,³ or the grass, "a sphere of
simple green" or a summer's noon "an azure depth," her
unpredictable manner of combining color and vocabulary to
present Emily Dickinson's personal observations of nature
that cannot be construed as anyone else's view. The
brightest palette of the Impressionist painter is used to
advantage to picture nature's pageantry as seen by Miss
Dickinson. She was not restrained by the technique of
writing poetry, or worrying about the method of portraying

¹

Todd and Bingham, Bolts of Melody, p. 292.

²

Bianchi, Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson, p. 111.

³

Ibid, p. 111.

nature as an Imagist might be bound, for she said, "The treason of an accent Might villify the joy."¹ As Miss Dickinson did, we can leave her beautiful nature "Blazing in gold and quenching in purple"² and turn to her more serious Impressions of Love and God's Eternity.

LOVE

The hero in Emily Dickinson's love life is an unknown quantity, but we do know the depths of pain and ecstatic heights Love brought to her. Separated from her lover in this world, she hopes for death to reunite them. Yet doubtful of time's uncertainty she gives a brilliant impression of love that "goads me, like the goblin bee, That will not state its sting."³ She likens herself to a river and her lover a sea "My river runs to thee: Blue sea, wilt welcome me?"⁴ She had held the jewel of love but briefly and then it was gone, "And now an amethyst remembrance Is all I own."⁵

¹

Bianchi, Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson, p. 306.

²

Ibid, p. 102.

³

Ibid, p. 147.

⁴

Ibid, p. 150.

⁵

Ibid, p. 165.

"Amethyst remembrance" is a typical Dickinson phrase, - individual, poignant and impressionistic. Again love can be outgrown, and as a thrifty New Englander she puts it in a drawer to await eternity. Her sadness at the necessity of separation from her love in this life is summed up in a tearful, melancholy vein that came from the depths:

My eye is fuller than my vase,
Her cargo is of dew,
And still my heart my eye₁ outweighs
East India for you!

She cut deep to the abyss of sorrow with that poem. Her faith that her love would be fulfilled after death was unshaken and she optimistically believed that

Love is like life, merely longer
Love is like death, daring the grave;
Love is the fellow of the resurrection
Scooping up the dust and chanting, 'Live!'₂

Who knows, the initial force driving Emily Dickinson through this life may have reached its goal. Honestly and simply she had declared her love, its unfulfillment and her hope that the happiness denied in this world would be granted in the next. There was no need to elaborate this simple story. Emily Dickinson did not elaborate. She

¹

Bianchi, Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson, p. 148.

²

Todd and Bingham, Bolts of Melody, p. 178.

analyzed her situation and calmly put love in the drawer to await eternity. She did not moralize, symbolize or imagize. She presented impressions of this love's effects upon her.

GOD

God was an acquaintance whom she had known for a long time. Her mind and spirit were related to Him and to Eternity. Despite this mystic side of her nature, she pictured God with an accuracy that remained within the bonds of Impressionism. Her niece, Miss Bianchi, says: "Her (Emily Dickinson's) interpretation demands height and depth of application in her readers; for, although her song is that of a soul not earth-bound by the senses, she does not always make it immediately plain when she speaks out of her own vision in her own tongue."¹ In other words, the biographer has practically called Miss Dickinson an Impressionist. Miss Dickinson, she says, uses her own plain speech; yet her poetic vision is not quite clear, which is a perfect combination for an Impressionist.

1

Bianchi, Introduction to Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson, p. viii.

A typical eight-line poem illustrates Miss Dickinson's use of "plain speech" and "not quite clear poetic vision."

I took my power in my hand
And went against the world;
'Twas not so much as David had,
But I was twice as bold.

I aimed my pebble, but myself
Was all the one that fell.
Was it Goliath was too large,¹
Or only I too small?

Miss Dickinson could mean that her own life was entirely frustrated. Had she, after all, tried to fit into society and been rejected? Also the poem might mean that she was entirely unsatisfied with the results of her poetic experiments. A third possible meaning was an attempt, perhaps, to use feminine wiles as her power to keep the man she loved but that power failed. At least three of Emily Dickinson's main interests in this world can be brought in as possible meanings, Life itself, her poetry, and Love. Perhaps none of these suggestions is satisfactory; yet Miss Dickinson's "plain speech" indicates an important meaning.

¹

Bianchi, Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson, p. 33.

Miss Dickinson has called God names ranging from "Heavenly Father"¹ and "Awful Father of Love"² to a "jealous God,"³ a "distant, stately Love,"⁴ or "Papa above."⁵ In relation to God she turns her microscope from life and nature to the faith within which is the realm of the mystic. Yet she was not wholly a mystic. Her poetry lies somewhere between mysticism and realism; her truth is somewhat clouded. As Clement Wood puts it: "Those near-truths that we call truth appear first as mmsts visible only to the seers; then slowly crystallize as years pass, until they assume the earthform called science. Between the insistent realist and the mystic is a permanent cleavage."⁶ Into the gap caused by this cleavage fits the

¹ Bianchi, Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson, p. 298.

² Todd and Bingham, Bolts of Melody, p. 185.

³ Ibid, p. 288.

⁴ Bianchi, Further Poems of Emily Dickinson, p. 198.

⁵ Bianchi, Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson, p. 295.

⁶ Wood, The Poets of America, p. 95.

Impressionism of Emily Dickinson, half-real, half-spirit. Nature and men were a real world; God and immortality were the spirit world.

She is sure that God exists and positive in her assurance:

I know that He exists
Somewhere in silence.
He has hid his rare life ¹
From our gross eyes.

That we can converse with Him she is sure because:

Prayer is the little implement
Through which men reach
When presence is denied them.²

One of her most famous objective works considering God maintains a note of mystic revelation:

I never saw a moor,
I never saw the sea;
Yet know I how the heather looks
And what a wave must be.

I never spoke with God.
Nor visited in heaven;
Yet certain am I of the spot
As if the chart were given. ³

¹
Bianchi, Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson, p. 45.

²
Ibid, p. 45.

³
Ibid, p. 188.

Faith was a hard fought-for and hard-won victory for Miss Dickinson's individuality. As we have shown, she had revolted against society's religious worship in favor of her personal one, in which God was the preacher and nature's creatures were the congregation. Nature itself was the Church. Many have criticized her enthusiastic familiarity with God; yet she meant no offense and only wished to be ever closer to Him:

How excellent the heaven,
When earth cannot be had;
How hospitable, then, the face₁
Of our old neighbor, God.

In her natural Church, she felt closer to God than in man-made houses of worship. She had found God and she stood before Him certain that she had followed her rainbow as He had ordained:

Adventure must unto itself
The soul condemned to be;
Attended by a Single Hound-₂
Its own Identity.

The "Single Hound" had gone her own way, revolting quietly against social customs and expressing an individual world of heart and garden in her poetry.

¹

Bianchi, Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson, p. 197.

²

Ibid, p. 25.

That poetic world Emily Dickinson left to posterity was similar to her personality, a tease and a torment. The scope of her subject, the unpredictable turn of her verse, and her mysterious combination of logic and intuition are a challenge to the literary student. The manner in which she left her poetic gems to the world is an interesting study in itself. In discussing the finding of Miss Dickinson's poems, Miss Bingham states that they were "a jumble of words on odds and ends of paper, some of it crumpled and torn. Most of them were smothered with alternative words and phrases crowded into every available space - around the edges, upside down, wedged between the lines. Some poems, filling the margins of drafts of letters to friends, are difficult to distinguish from the body of the letter, following without a break on the same sheet of paper. Many are written on the backs of brown-paper bags or of discarded bills, programs and invitations, on tiny scraps of stationery pinned together;¹

So the story continues, indicating that Miss Dickinson was careless regarding the survival of her art. A positive

¹

Todd and Bingham, Introduction to Bolts of Melody, pp. xii and xv.

proof of her individuality is her indifference to the mob, although she was obsessed with the idea of fame. There are nine poems in Bolts of Melody that deal with the subject of fame. Although her poems were not published in her lifetime, Miss Dickinson felt that fame was her due. Miss Bingham points out this fact in her Introduction to Bolts of Melody.

A little known fact was that Miss Dickinson began to polish her works, working them over; but she had not revised very many before her death. Those that she had revised contained, as a rule, only minor changes. It is justifiable, therefore, to note that she was fulfilling another unspoken rule of the Impressionists, that of accepting the original work as it was and leaving it in its original form for posterity. As Huneker pointed out: "For the world at large impressionism spells improvisation."¹ If any poet ever improvised, Emily Dickinson did. Mr. Whicher, Miss Bingham, and Miss Bianchi all point out that Emily Dickinson trusted the diamond in the rough of her verse rather than polishing and fixing her verses and possibly marring the original diamond. Miss Dickinson was not one of those artists who

¹

Huneker, op. cit., p. 19.

substituted perfection of craftsmanship for a lack of imagination and creative power. These last two functions she possessed, a true sign of genius, and the former, technique, she ignored. This would definitely lead her work from the classification of "Imagism" where many critics hint that it belongs. Imagism was interested in technique and shunned ideas, as Ezra Pound, one of its disciples, maintained. On the other hand, Miss Dickinson was a poet of ideas, not techniques or sciences of writing verse. The weakness of Impressionism in the art world was its scientific side. Huneker claims that "Its values are strictly aesthetic."¹ As Clive Bell put it, "The science of Impressionism turned out to be sadly unscientific."² Again, Emily Dickinson can be compared to the painter, Vincent Van Gogh, of whom an art critic says

The axis of Van Gogh's fascinating art was his curious, intense personality with its need for salvation through paint. It just had to express its soul and spread it on canvas."³

¹

Ibid, p. 23.

²

Bell, Landmarks in 19th Century Painting, p. 196.

³

Lewisohn, Painters and Personalities, p. 51.

It would be a simple observation to note that Miss Dickinson's intense personality had to have expression in poetry. The science of producing that personality, or the recording of her art for posterity, was incidental to a true artist. First and foremost was the necessity of writing down her impressions.

She sums up her whole task, her whole art and her faults with

This is my letter to the world,
That never wrote to me, -
The simple news that Nature told,
With tender majesty....

Her message is committed
To hands I cannot see;
For love of her sweet countrymen,¹
Judge tenderly of me!

This is a touching message from a great artist to the world and is, in a way, an apology; yet she maintains that she has carried her art to fruition, convinced that she has been a faithful craftsman, depicting her impressions of all just as she felt them. It is difficult to resist the appeal of "Judge tenderly of me!" Her message, like her work, is simple and unadorned, free and unfettered, personal and sincere.

1

Bianchi, Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson, p. 2.

CHAPTER VII

SUMMARY

A statement of the traits of the Impressionist painters has given tangible evidence of the directed and often unconscious aims and purposes of this talented group, a basis of reference for the derivation of a revolting spirit behind that school of painting, and a basis for comparison of Emily Dickinson's spirit and poetry. A study of all that Emily Dickinson had written in her verse that bore relation to the purpose of Impressionism made possible a shaping of her philosophy and gave something substantial for further study. Any statement of religious or philosophical belief was gathered from ideas expressed in her poetry. Examples of her poetry consistently exhibited traits in writing that were akin to the tenets of Impressionistic painting. The repetition of these traits in her writing, therefore, form the basis of the statement that they are characteristic of her work.

Briefly, the Impressionists aimed at the use of color rather than line as the basis of good painting. Revolt against "romantic fictions" and "classical copying"

was a factor in the development of their individualistic technique. Capturing the essence of the subject rather than imaginative adorning or realistic photographing placed this movement in a realm somewhere between realism and romanticism. To capture this essence and flitting nuances of light a new brush technique of short, austere brushstrokes was adopted. Last, but far from least, was the belief that the original impression was important; leave the work unadorned, unhampered. A diamond in the rough was more valuable to the Impressionist.

Approximately two hundred samples of Emily Dickinson's poetry support the opinions of critics and biographers as to what her personal philosophy and poetic spirit indicate. All agree that she showed definite tendencies of individuality, revolt, imagination, sincerity, and originality. All agree that she employed a fresh, unique style that did not polish or elaborate on her original works.

Her personal revolt against empty creeds, formal religions, institutions, social customs and bonds, her sincere admission of her doubts and fears in defiance of the religious and social standards of her times, and her

substitution of her own creed of honesty, simplicity, love, and poetic faith indicate a fundamental kinship between her spirit and the spirit of the Impressionist group. Sincerity and contempt for hypocrisy led her to oppose artificiality and superficial elaboration in poetic practice. She made it her special pleasure to record what she immediately saw or felt existed in nature at the moment of observation.

Miss Dickinson possessed a sensitive eye and vivid imagination, rare in mortal. She could grasp so quickly the essential elements of objects viewed that, when recorded, the elements give the reader a charming and memorable picture. Yet her pictures are incomplete. Each forms a facet in her poetic diamond. The diamond itself is left to posterity in the rough. Perhaps it is lamentable that her work was unfinished; however, the Impressionist left unfinished work, and in neither their paintings nor her poems disenchantment. We shall always be aware of Miss Dickinson's daring experiment in verse, the more notable because her work was carried on in the midst of an uncomprehending social environment. No doubt it will always constitute a mark of genius to be misunderstood and unappreciated. Emerson was right.

Emotional intensity and the autobiographical nature of her work classify her as a Romantic. Her lack of sentimentality, her indifference to classic literature, her natural treatment of the world she knew cry out Realist. It is immediately apparent that Miss Dickinson's poetry must lie somewhere in the realm between the Romantic and Realistic schools of poetry. This world of half fact and half fancy has been called Impressionism in the field of painting. For want of a better term it may apply also to Miss Dickinson's poetry.

Specifically, examples of Imagist poetry were used to indicate the lack of sympathy between the school of realistic poetry and the verse of Miss Dickinson. The reader finds that "H.D.'s" poem cited was stiff, impersonal and technical. A sufficient sampling of Miss Dickinson's poetry has been submitted to indicate its warmth, personality, mobility and above all its intensity. The Georgian poets have been called at various times Romantics or Impressionists. On closely examining examples of such poetry one finds a tendency to sentimentalize, a love of classical allusion and uniformity of structure. Miss

Dickinson cared little for the niceties of technically and mechanically perfect verse. Her austere verses bear little ornamentation or indication of "purple passage." Nor do we find classical titles or subjects in the samples used in the thesis proper. She did not try to interpret nature as Wordsworth or Bryant would have done. Emily Dickinson was an observer, not an interpreter. Expression rather than interpretation was a specific trait of the Impressionist painters we noted.

Therefore the findings in her poetry justify the title of poetic Impressionist, for in addition to her spirit, her poetical practice as substantiated in these findings warrants her a rank as an Impressionist in 19th century American poetry. For all the practices of the Impressionists mentioned there were sufficient examples cited to verify the contention of this thesis. Added to the poetry itself were the comments of critics and biographers which, although never using the word Impressionism, afforded similar definitions or statements indicating Miss Dickinson's kinship to this movement. One of the weaknesses of Impressionism is even a weakness of the greater amount of her poetry, that is, its lack of polish and its unfinished, fragmentary, unscientific appearance. Biographer Bingham noted that Miss Dickinson

actually polished a few verses, but the majority were left in "casual simplicity." This was at once a strength and a weakness of Impressionism. The Classicists pounce upon it as a weakness and the Realists point to it with pride as an indication of virtuosity and poetic improvisation.

Emily Dickinson had fought for what she believed was right, for her convictions, with a vigor and deliberation that is almost incredible, and would be incredible, if we did not see her inner strife put before our eyes in her own words. Her path had been difficult because there were few who could appreciate her point of view, as indicated by Higginson's lack of understanding. There were even fewer who knew of the inner battle she fought. Miss Dickinson may have lost the world, but now, after her death, the world has found her. How much her way of life cost her we can only surmise but we do know that she herself was aware of a bittersweet existence, and bravely proclaimed that

To fight aloud is very brave,
But gallanter, I know,
Who charge within the bosom,¹
The cavalry of woe!

1

Bianchi, Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson, p. 12.

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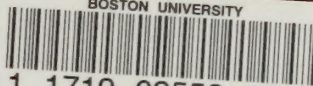
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